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MOUTH

THESIS

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
University of Mississippi

Dorothy Lynn Knight

May 2013



## ABSTRACT

Poems written between August 2010 and April 2013.

## DEDICATION

These poems are dedicated to my neighborhood in South Georgia, to which Pizza Hut and Domino's will still not deliver—but from which fresh corn and cane syrup can be gotten for a nominal price: Browntown.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ann Fisher-Wirth and Gary Short for convincing me to come to the University of Mississippi during that week in Squaw Valley, summer of 2009. I didn't know I was ready.

Many thanks are due to Ann for her support over these three years, in workshop and through the process of assembling this. Her laser eyes see the beating heart of a poem.

Thanks also to Beth Spencer, for helping me find a way to say the hard things and remain standing straight, and to Annette Trefzer, for getting on the bus before she knew where I was headed.

Lastly, I say to my family—Mom, Dad and Linda, Jessie and Kevin, Ken and Steve and Athena—this isn't the whole story, or even the true story, but it's the best I can tell today. Thank you for teaching me to be proud of where I come from.

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## 1. Life Skills

## Inheritance

You might say I'm house-proud.  
My cousin's 3-year-old wet her pants while sitting in her lap.  
I lifted the hem of her windbreaker, catching the runoff in the valleys  
of her body, but she asked me to let go and get a towel, and I couldn't.

I've got a spaniel shaped-planter that gives me that look.  
My best friend's dog has been trained on puppy pads  
which means he only pisses and shits inside on squares and triangles.

My grandmother put down rugs to save the carpet.  
The brown shag held up after she died, after the floor rotted.  
My ankles just swing back and forth over the holes  
like they're in a bear fur hammock.

My mother wants me to keep a sidetable that my grandfather shot  
a hole in with a .22, chasing a raccoon out of the house.  
She won't replace the cardboard lining her cupboards  
because my grandmother jotted down phone numbers there.

I've got a Fire King bowl with her name on it in masking tape.  
There are days I can't leave the house  
for fear of deserting the company I keep in my own head.

The front door's brass plaque reads "As for me and mine,  
we will serve the Lord." My grandmother used to wake in the middle  
of the night on weekdays and dress for church.

She wasn't in her right mind, but she knew she was skinnier  
than she had ever been. Pecan pinwheel pastries, 2x2x2, and coffee  
were all she would eat. My mother won't discard her breast prosthesis.  
It sits in the left drawer of her dresser, warmly cupping her own bras.

My mother watches the Food network from her recliner in the dark,  
microwaves a baked potato from the night before, adds ranch to the meat.  
My mother has started to wear her clothes. Pastel elastic waistbands,  
matching shirts with floral appliques.

The seal on the bedroom windows has been broken.  
Condensation between the panes has turned the glass opaque.

## For This Meal

My grandfather had freckled forearms,  
red hair a distant past beneath his hat  
green-visored and cocked against the sun.  
The tractor had a metal bucket seat,  
had always been the color of rust.

Lunch rattled on in aluminum pots  
until his sugar got low or the sun  
took his shadow beneath the wheels churning  
black dirt that made the air taste of manure and pine.  
A hot, fine powder beneath my knees.

I don't remember eating the peanuts  
he farmed, only sucking on cane pole  
he cut with a pocket knife, a section  
he doled to me for helping my grandma  
pick and shell fresh pink lady peas.

I listened to his cup tap the saucer;  
I watched his hands shake nervously, knock blades  
of grass from the cuff of his shirt; I bent  
close as he bent finger blood to machine,  
gave another bit of self for the farm.

He smelled like sweat and warmed cotton,  
like the sour grass he mowed from the fields,  
He still slicked his hair straight back like a younger man,  
but he pushed his upper dentures out to jaw at me  
while my grandmother got the plates.

She mashed my black-eyed peas with a fork,  
poured cane syrup over what was left.  
She took my hand in hers, her skin dry  
from dish detergent and bleach.  
We all bowed our heads, but my eyes were open.

I watched both of them believe  
in how blessed we were and say in unison  
*Dear father, we thank you for this meal.*

## **Grandmother**

My mom said there was another woman when he worked for the railroad,  
but my grandmother won him back. Three daughters, a wife who saved  
yogurt containers, spoonfuls of peas. She sewed tiny sleeves in Sunday dresses

for the straps of her daughters' bras. When he wore out his work-shirts  
she saved buttons from his cuffs and strung them all together with thread.  
There are eleven olive green necklaces in her sewing box.

They slept side by side in separate queen beds for as long as I can remember.  
On nights my mother wore green silk and cork espadrilles just to drop me off,  
my grandmother put me to sleep spelling four and five letter words on my back,  
itsy-bitsy-spidering up and down my spine.

My grandmother was the only one who could do it: loop sewing thread  
around a loose tooth, push the knot down to the root with one finger,  
snatch it free without pain.

She found the lump in her breast by herself, saw the puckering in the mirror  
drying off after a shower: her skin the texture of an orange.  
After surgery, her single breast in its sling weighted down the towel rod  
next to her side of his and her sinks.

## **Grandfather**

Time and a lapel pin divided the church deacon  
from the moonshine runner,  
but my mother's stories bring a man to life  
that I never knew:  
A young man I know to be tall, broad shouldered,  
driving with a trunk full of cow-feed  
bearing the back end of his car down  
the median where the sheriff pulled him over,  
triumphant,  
and told him to pop the lock.  
Her story goes that he flicked boiled peanut hulls  
for hours on the side of the road,  
refusing to comply until the search warrant came through.  
The Sheriff must have been disappointed.  
I imagine him smiling as he said it sure had been a nice visit  
but he had to be going now, he had a farm to tend to.  
He ran lightning between his stills for years after that, undisturbed.

**Some Things Don't Keep**  
for Browntown

My brothers used to keep porn in the swamp,  
tucked in a tackle box  
between two cypress knees,  
the same place I hunkered  
trying to smoke my mom's Marlboros.

My stepfather,  
the one who worked the night shift,  
stripped palmetto bushes  
and collected fat lighter for the fire  
closer than he knew to Miss July.

My cousins picked rotten gourds from the vine  
and chucked them at me,  
shot cats down at the camp  
where the beagles whined.

I'd glue on press-on nails  
and row out to the middle of the pond,  
a trail of petals curling up from my palms,  
checking pitcher plants for lives to set free.

Developers bought up a big parcel of land  
and planned a gated subdivision  
opposite the trailer park  
and miles from the black water of the Satilla.

They put up a sign that said, "North Shore,"  
a guard house,  
and graded rolling, gold course hills  
next to highway like a fence.

Ten years later there's one model house,  
a genuine log cabin that had been  
landscaped in neat squares of sod  
the land ate in tangles of stickers, milkweed  
and the high sweet grass  
our children chew on during baseball games.

First base: the white lid to a bucket of paint;  
Second and third: rotten plywood;

and home: a sign marked with a lot number,  
turning to dust with every run.

## **Mosquito Tits**

“Let me see how wide you can open your mouth,”  
and when I did they called me mosquito tits and met eyes above the bus seats.

One of them could sniff a shoestring up his nose and give it back through his mouth.  
Another had tied his skateboard to a pick-up truck

and the rest had videoed his concussion upchuck onto the pavement.  
We rode with the windows up all summer because a kid threw a baseball at a passing car

and no one told or owned up. The girls boarded with Wild Turkey in travel mugs  
embossed with the paper mill’s logo, flashed cars out the emergency exit, caught pregnant early.

The afternoon bus was dark inside, empty pairs of brown seats aligned, black rubber floors,  
a black man the driver substitute.

He had paperwork marked with the stops, wore a hat, never had to turn.  
My boyfriend had curls in his mullet, and used a coke can as a spit catch for his Skoal.

He had a limp from a blue light sale hit-and-run in the K-mart crosswalk,  
but his fingers were a doctor’s slipping in the button seam of my skirt

beneath a hardback Stephen King I clutched in my lap on the hump seat of the bus,  
cut with pencil slashes, “slut,” “school sucks” in permanent marker.



**Careful; it's hot. I cooked it with fire.**

When I wake up, I sometimes think,  
*"Im'll set this day afire."*

My mother slept while the space heater ignited,  
black soot still beneath her nostrils  
when she met me at the bus stop.

I told my brother,  
"what's your point?"  
and we wrestled until the spatula  
from his grilled cheese sizzled into my thigh.

A lot of oysters get roasted  
when the gas in the stove runs low.

The stove came from a salvage yard.  
The smell of rat droppings is a high, sweet note  
when homemade biscuits bake.

My father tells me butter is the best remedy for burns.

I set a Styrofoam plate on the flat top,  
where it melted into a typography that doesn't shift.

At the end of the night,  
we throw empty cases of Bud Light on the fire  
and dance in the ash.

## **Apalachicolas**

My father closed the grill lid,  
let the oysters cook until juice hissed into the coals.  
He popped three shells open and cut anchor to dry,  
filigreed muscles, said,  
“Here’s you some.”  
I crowded them on a saltine with hot sauce,  
chewed for too long.  
He laid me out two more  
of the ones that had cooked too long  
before he found the fats for himself  
around the edges of the rack,  
just warmed.  
He washed them down with beer,  
and I started to wet down  
the burlap sack the bushel came in,  
knowing the cover would steam them,  
keep the moisture inside,  
before I remembered  
that this was my father’s house and my father’s meat.

Even after I had had my fill,  
I kept eating hard little oysters from his hands,  
saying ‘thank you’ for the meal.

## How to Be Small

This one was 6'5" in cowboy boots.  
He took my mother and me shining  
on a weekend dark fell early,  
gave me my own rechargeable lantern  
to eke out alligators in the black water.  
He told me, "You'll know them by their eyes,"  
pulling on his cigarette until it glowed hot and red.

My last dad had worn tasseled loafers,  
banded polo shirts,  
and he drove away in his demo model  
with the page detailing its special features  
obscuring his features.  
Mom and I cut him from family photos  
with fabric shears during commercial breaks,  
and it was like he never happened.

This one worked the night shift  
and slept through the day.  
Mom said he "would do anything for you, Dottie,"  
but he didn't like me shining a flashlight  
into their dark bedroom after she left for work.

I slept on a loveseat in the living room,  
and fought my new brother for the right  
to watch Star Trek there after school.  
I didn't stay to watch after socking him a good one  
with the vacuum. I didn't quite clear the fields  
between our house and my grandmother's  
before he called her to say  
I still had some cleaning to do.  
She took the message and scrambled  
my eggs again in the shape of the bread,  
sat down to watch me eat.  
She told me I was too pretty to act so ugly,  
but she let me stay until the daily double on Jeopardy.

I went home and put my ear to the metal door.  
I hid all the wooden spoons and leather belts.  
I made myself small. I read so many books  
I started using big words,  
except I mispronounced them,  
reading more than I spoke.  
Epi-tome.

En-com-pass.

In the summer, Mom covered the windows  
in aluminum foil and put a sprinkler on the roof.  
Inside the metal box it was always raining and dark.  
No one told me I would ruin my eyes, reading that way.

When Mom got sick,  
she just switched to menthol cigarettes,  
and he started taking some other woman on fishing trips.  
Mom kept feeding his son until he was full-grown,  
so big he broke the steering column  
on his first car using it to lift himself out of the driver's seat.

The paper mill closed in the winter,  
and she drove to the employee parking lot  
where they were giving away buckets of margarine,  
frozen appetizers in crushed boxes:  
jalapeno poppers to keep the family warm.

I'm so quiet now in my own apartment  
the neighbors don't know I'm home.

## **Every Body Knows it**

The body knows  
when to run  
barefoot  
over cypress tree roots  
in the rain,  
to lunge  
for the passenger side lock  
before sliding the driver's seat  
closer.  
The body understands  
that bodies in the way of cars  
will move,  
knows to accelerate  
with steady pressure,  
then regular pumps of the big toe.  
The body remembers  
how to still  
in quiet  
and wait for the light  
to see by,  
how to find its way  
back home.  
Every body knows  
how to do  
as the body has done before.

## Moves

My father's still got that new perm smell,  
still has the ladies at the parlor use rods,  
cleans his nails with a pocket knife  
while he waits.

He busts the same laugh he used to use  
bent over the pool tables in the biker bar  
where he met my mom.

He drove a trike with a keg in the backseat,  
and I'm not sure how he took her home.

My stepmother tells me she didn't listen  
when she heard he was bad news.  
She tells a drunk as a cooter story  
about the gate at the hunting club  
being locked  
and Dad saying he could make it,  
making for two trees  
approximately a pickup width apart  
He left his bumper behind,  
but he says, "I made it, didn't I?"

My brother me told me Dad didn't make it  
to his last wedding ceremony,  
that he left for milk and bread that morning  
and didn't come back.

On his 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary,  
he took my stepmother on a cruise,  
swayed to calypso music in the conga line  
with one hand rubbing her ass  
and the other hooked around a bucket of beer.

The women of my father's past and present,  
when they say pleasant things,  
all say the same thing:  
"That man sure can move."

## **They Call Me Mouth**

All the windows were open and sunlight folded in through the naked frames.  
The carpet was maroon, and I wasn't yet thinking how it would show every little thing.

Someone had painted over the ribbed floral wallpaper in a thin coat of white paint, then used a feather duster to make a pattern in brown that looked a lot like asterisks.

I told her the pattern was kind of neat, and my mom said, yeah, it looked like shit.  
She didn't get mad when I broke her crystal vase. She kept it empty on the windowsill

behind the sink. It was fluted, etched in a design I couldn't see for the dust.  
It broke in my hands, submerged in hot dishwater with my hand inside it to the wrist.

She didn't even seem surprised. It was like I had been breaking her things all my life.

When her boyfriend got mad and tore the door from the bathroom hinges,  
no one fixed it because no one wanted to acknowledge that it had happened.

For months, every time I had to pee, I lifted the door off the carpet and replaced it behind me.  
I got so tired of barricading myself in, one night I didn't prop it against the doorjamb

at a sharp enough angle. I had taken my shirt and bra off and had my hand cupped  
beneath the faucet, waiting for the heat. When the door fell back, it pinned me against the lip

of the tub. I didn't expect it to hurt. I was braced and the door had a foam filling.  
But when I called out for help, it was real.

## **What Happens in the House Stays in the House**

It's hard to explain when the weight on your chest  
is a 150 lb woman trying to lick your face,  
holding your arms to the carpet,  
and the family cocker spaniel's nose is in your ear,  
growling at your mother,  
her breath a blended whiskey, Canadian Lord Calvert  
she got at the drive-through liquor store  
with you in the passenger seat.  
It doesn't seem like a joke to either one of you:  
you can't breathe,  
and you know that if the dog gets any more excited  
she's going to piss right there in front of the tv,  
but your new stepdad is offering moonshine  
to his youngest son in the kitchen,  
"Just taste it,"  
and the other is laughing from the couch  
because he's never had a mother before,  
and it seems like this is what families do:  
you are close enough to smell his white sports socks  
but not close enough to ask for help,  
and the cigarette in one of her hands  
burns your upper arm;  
she's offended you aren't laughing  
so she starts asking, "What the hell are you on?"  
and saying she's going to take you to the hospital,  
but your arms are still pinned to the carpet.  
Your new stepbrother still thinks it's a joke,  
and when you start to buck your mother from your chest  
they all stop what they're doing to laugh harder,  
and she sticks her finger in your open mouth:



## Free

Jesup, GA

I used to joke that we don't have family reunions because we don't want to know.  
but my dad said it was his cousin's birthday,  
and I went because I didn't know he had any cousins.  
We had a drought that year  
and a wildfire had burned through the swamp for a month.  
We drove through the smoke.

He stopped in a graveyard  
and showed me a headstone with my name.  
His mother died when he was twelve.  
I waited while he set the flower arrangements of strangers  
to rights. I was waiting for him to say something else,  
but he just said it was time to go.

She was still putting her face on when we got there  
teasing her hair with a rat tail comb,  
ironing up the collar of her shirt,  
hot pink. It was her birthday,  
and she had just gotten out of prison,  
a fifteen year stint that left her a vamp  
with ten grandchildren.

She was testing that theory about blondes,  
had eyelashes like Tammy Wynette.  
She hugged me so hard I stepped on her toes  
through her nude hose and slippers.  
She told me I looked just like my daddy  
and asked me if I had any kids.

She opened presents in a circle of women and my dad.  
She unwrapped a feather boa and a plastic tiara,  
and she worked it into her hair while she sipped a margarita.  
And then she started to tell stories.

She asked my dad if he remembered that time  
somebody shot at them on the dirt road  
and she swung the rifle down from the gun rack  
behind his head and fired back while he took the wheel.  
She yelled "Git Down! Git Down!" like it was happening right then,  
and all the men keeping vigil around a cooler in the corner of the yard  
ducked. It took them a while to start talking again.

She said my dad broke up one of her dates at the drive-in

jumping into the back seat with bloody knuckles  
and screaming *go, go, go*—  
She said they used to have a lot of pancake dinners,  
nights when they weren't allowed to leave syrup on the plate.  
She said Dot was the best kind of woman,  
but she married a man who sieved mouthwash  
through slices of white bread.

It was the first time I know of that my father left a party early.  
We took a different route home to skirt the fire-breaks.  
It was the summer pine trees burned through three counties,  
and it snowed ash.  
He never slowed.

## Step

I had a brother once who was a real blonde  
skateboarder from California  
who asked me to lie in the road  
and become part of his feats of strength  
and downhill velocity.

My real brother used me as a barbell,  
took me out to the high grass of the field,  
made a circle of cousins, said, "Fight."  
My real brother taught me how to form a fist  
so I wouldn't break my thumb.

He bought me cigarettes and kept the change.  
He posed as my father on the phone once  
when a little girl's mother called  
to say her daughter had been snatched  
bald-headed on the bus.

He wouldn't stop laughing when he found me  
hanging by my denim skirt  
from the tree I had been climbing.  
He just left me suspended, legs dangling free  
three feet above the ground in the front yard.

I had a brother once who was 6 ft tall  
and only listened to country and western music.  
I had to hit him with the vacuum cleaner  
to turn the radio dial.

My real brother put me in a headlock  
and made me refer to him now and always  
as Master of the Universe.

My real brother considered me a spare key,  
shoved me through the bathroom window  
and still had to wait for hours until Mom got home.

I got a big sister last year.  
She put me on a dirt bike in her daughter's gear,  
showed me the brake and the clutch,  
and then left me eating her dust.

I had a dad once who sold used cars  
and drove nice ones with the tag still in the window.

His polo shirts had a waistband.  
His mustache smelled like Listerine,  
and when he left  
my mother asked me if he had ever touched me.

My real brother taught me how to scream  
to metal music in a Lincoln.  
We picked up a turtle on the highway,  
took it all the way home,  
and I wrote my name on its back in magic marker,  
watched it run.

## **A Private Eye Walks into a Bar**

My sister walked so quickly in platform shoes  
I lose her in the airport  
right after I think I find myself.

My sister taught me how  
to drive home drunk from strip bars—  
to keep my eyes ahead and never look down—  
to read cellular phone bills for clues,  
and check the temperature of his hood for lies.

She said she had gone back to dancing  
like it was her first love  
only it was her last love  
in bed with another woman  
during the lunch hour.

She doesn't do 140 crunches a day for nothing.  
She dances with her eyes on the ceiling tiles  
and thinks about rent and school clothes.

She is the first to the edge of the cliff, topless,  
and holds my hand until we hit the water.  
She rings the pole  
in horseshoes,  
hates to lose,  
and rides motorbikes upright  
with her hair streaming behind her.

She was raised by a very nice foster family  
in Salt Lake City.

I didn't have a sister until I was 24.  
When she told me, my stepmother didn't say hello or unfold  
from the couch to clasp my back,  
she said only, "Your sister called today,"  
clipped,  
as if her daughters didn't call every day.

I wanted to know  
if our fingers were the same length,  
if we both laughed at dirty jokes,  
if I would be her in twelve years.

Her friends said, "You could be sisters."

### **How to Be Alone**

My mom keeps saying she's going to make a planter  
out of that portable commode in the back  
like rednecks do—  
she fancies she's one of those—  
snapping beans,  
waving at that woman in curlers  
motoring by on her motor wheelchair  
and her little dog too.  
We walk to the back yard,  
and you've never seen a woman more proud  
of a riding lawnmower  
--go ahead, sit in it.  
She says she's doing fine.  
The well water is doing her good.  
She's learning how to be alone  
between—hold still—  
her lips a cigarette held firm  
and her lighter flicks,  
burns a string on my shirt  
I've tucked in a sleeve for three weeks,  
setting me right again,  
by way of fire,  
and smoothing my hair.

## **How to Dance**

I watched the boy next to me dance without bones, his body a snake writhing up from his knees, flapping his alpaca sweater open and closed like it was a place he'd welcome me inside.

A man from the other side clapped, raised pairs of arms and eyes to heaven before he prayed to the floor. A leg in black jeans set a ring of keys jangling.

Women bent their bodies stiff over from the waist in the jam band dance. Men, all slung hair, pumped fists in singles. A motionless pompadour kept the special

metronome of point-toed leather shoes. A man with a gold necklace and arms outstretched—drives a car down a dirt road with curves and I just think about my mother telling me first

that it was nothing, that it was all in keeping rhythm and then, later, that it was just like sex.

## **How to Have Quality Time**

We had started with a Red Ryder, then a .22 with a wooden handgrip,  
and then a police issue Ruger that bucked in my hands, played hell on the cans,  
my aim, through two whole clips without hitting a thing. He was listening to Bruce Springsteen.  
He was burning something plastic in his burn barrel, outside the shed with a U.S. flag flying.

He hugged me with one arm. I told him I loved him, and he pushed me from the shoulder, took a  
kumquat from the tree he said was bitter this year, said to be careful on the roads.



## Tell Me

If she had asked how little prepared I was  
to be her mother,  
I'd have told her how she screamed  
when I touched her neck,  
tucked her chin, wouldn't let me wash it,  
and summer sweat would ring.  
I'd have told her how long it took  
for the bite mark on her thigh to fade,  
how she cried when sunlight hit her face,  
riding in the backseat,  
and I only turned up the radio.  
I'd have mentioned how she loved dehydrated space ice cream  
I brought home from a class field trip.

I'd have told her I locked her on the porch  
when she woke at night, screaming,  
hands balled into fists,  
pistoning her Barney blanket  
to the end of the bed  
with the heels of her feet.  
I never set the cordless phone down.  
I carried her planked body outside  
and wouldn't let her back in  
until I heard her quiet through the door.

She had a walker ringed in an aluminum bumper,  
hard little wheels that crushed my feet,  
zwieback teething cookies smashed in her seat,  
her hands that reached for me.  
She smelled like WIC gifted Simulac,  
vitamin D milk that was never the same after the freeze.

If she had asked, I'd have told her I was the only girl on the block  
drinking Juicy Juicy from the can all summer break,  
lying with my face pressed to the floor vent grate,  
while a pillow tilted the milk in her bottle  
down to her lips.

She was waiting.

I told her she'd been a fat baby, a Michelin man,  
a caterpillar floating ass up in the garden tub,  
that she was beautiful,  
that I could tell we were related,

that she looked just like me.

## War

I made up a game to settle disputes  
when rock paper scissors didn't work  
called war.  
She didn't want him in her room,  
and he didn't want her to touch his things,  
so I sent them to look for soft toys  
and checked their haul for hard little button eyes,  
plastic arms, and battery-powered insides.  
I made them forts on either end of the living room  
from the upended coffee table  
and the recliner with cigarette burns on the arm,  
and when they were ready, I yelled, Go!  
They launched stuffed animals over the expanse  
of carpet, into the ceiling fan,  
into the face of the bubble TV console,  
and brother and sister rarely hit each other.  
I corralled ammunition from the corners of the room,  
restocked reservoirs on my knees.  
I took turns as soldier in each of their armies,  
aiming for their chests, the top of their soft heads.  
They squealed.  
And the war went on until they got tired.  
Or hit a lamp.

The sound of glass breaking brought my mother  
in her day nightgown with a drink in her hand  
from the dark of her room.  
But we had caught her at the arc of her drunk  
where she wanted to laugh,  
and everything is funny.  
She took up a position at the other end of the family room,  
and I surprised myself  
when I threw a Garfield doll with suction cup arms at her face  
and aimed to hurt.

## **How to Read in the Dark**

The lights were out, but the sound of the radiator was a rocket ship  
that wouldn't launch. I told his back I could teach him to read in the dark.  
I stuttered to start, had my wipe his shoulder blades clean of the first strokes.  
I began again, all lowercase, my fingertips a stylus:

An oval for tomorrow.

The arc of an open mouth for need.

A cross for where to bite the inside of my thigh—the gracilis.

An eggshell to bear our weight.

A sickle for harvest.

A horseshoe, point up, to hold the luck in.

My grandmother's bent spine.

Octopus, he said.

## **Gilman Paper Mill**

St. Mary's, GA

The owner was a man of the arts,  
not a businessman.

He built a private zoo  
with reticulated giraffes,  
rhinos, and tigers.

Howard was from New York.  
He called it White Oak Plantation,  
though white oaks aren't native to the southern coast,  
and it used to be a rice plantation.

\*\*\*

The mayor of St. Mary's said Howard Gilman  
did everything he could not to lay people off,  
even when the market for paper depressed:  
"He kept those machines going all the time."

\*\*\*

My mother tried to save the paper mill  
and her last marriage  
getting her groceries double-bagged  
in paper at Winn Dixie.

It was the only job her husband had ever worked,  
straight out of high school.  
He had 20 years of seniority, but he worked the graveyard shift.  
She packed him leftovers in Glad plastic-ware for lunch,  
and he carried it all in a paper sack.

He left for work at midnight,  
and she'd wake me on the couch.  
We'd watch reruns of Mr. Bean  
in their bed with the still warm sheets  
until I fell asleep.

\*\*\*

Howard had a gallery in the Met named after him.  
A curator said their acquisition of his photography collection  
was one of the most—no, the most—important thing

that is likely ever to happen.

*The New York Times* calls Howard a “paper magnate.”

He farmed timber for the paper mill on his own lands and never seeded for new.

\*\*\*

Howard invested in a television show called “Space Precinct,” featuring the extraterrestrial adventures of former NYPD detective Patrick Brogan, now a lieutenant with the Demeter City police force on the planet Alto.

“Space Police” was already taken.

At the time it was the most expensive show ever produced in the UK.

When the cast disembarks from the space ship,  
viewers can often see that the ship is really a car, with a dome light.

In one episode, Brogan crashes his patrol car into the front of a street café and says,  
“Table for two, please!”

The show was cancelled after one season.

\*\*\*

Gilman Paper Mill employees gathered annually at a local park for a company picnic.  
Two years after the closure, Union officials  
call each former employee to personally invite them  
and reach a lot of disconnected telephones.

Jeffrey Blackmon, claiming to be owed \$44, 811 in back pay, said he can understand why some of them decided not to come. “We had a lot of promises broken to us. Some of them are mad at the world. Some have drug problems, drinking problems. I already know two people who have gotten a divorce.”

\*\*\*

Jeffrey entered the Army reserves  
and returned home a quadriplegic.  
My mom said his wife had been having an affair while he was gone.  
Now she has the affair in front of the hospital bed  
stationed in their trailer’s family room.

\*\*\*

White Oak Plantation's mission statement: "Our mission is to preserve and protect those areas Howard considered most vulnerable and in need of his help."

\*\*\*

I know Mikhail Baryshnikov  
as the man who slapped Carrie Bradshaw on *Sex and the City*.  
In New York, he's a famous ballet dancer.  
White Oak employees call him Misha.

Howard Gilman was also a patron of ballet.  
He built Misha a dance studio at the plantation.

In 1975, Misha sprained his ankle executing a grand jete.  
In *People* Magazine, he said he could hear the bones break.  
He made up a new dance step to finish the piece  
and stood still through three curtain calls before he collapsed.

Howard gave Misha horseback riding lessons  
and said, "after three he saddled up and cantered away,  
and my heart was in my mouth."

\*\*\*

NIGHT FEVER:

"His moves took your breath away," says Liza Minnelli, getting down with Mikhail Baryshnikov, her purported paramour, at Studio 54 in 1977.  
And off the dance floor? "None of your beeswax!"

\*\*\*

Misha had a daughter with Jessica Lange in 1981.  
"Ballet is no longer my life," Misha says. "It is my job. My life is my interests—my books, my paintings and my music. I don't want to share this with anybody but my daughter and my lady."

Lange was still married to former film instructor Paco Grande. Grande had gone blind since their separation. It was retinitis pigmentosa, and he was suing for alimony as well as divorce. She paid him \$300 a month.

\*\*\*

White Oak Plantation wasn't open to the public,  
but the Clintons were helicoptered in  
to rest after Monica Lewinsky.

About 50 people well-wished them outside its gates.

The president made his weekly radio broadcast from White Oak,  
urging protection of the nation's beaches.

A photo was later released of Bill Clinton feeding pine cones to a white rhinoceros.

\*\*\*

"A lot of people come through here, kings and all that crap,"  
says Trisha Gose, who runs the Down Home Market,  
located two blocks from the town's one traffic light.

\*\*\*

Howard died at White Oak in '98.  
He never married and had no children.  
The mill went up for sale.

\*\*\*

Members of Clean Air Network schedule a planning strategy meeting.  
"I don't want to cause problems for the employees," said Cynthia Fritts,  
the group's co-founder. "I just don't think my air should be compromised  
for a job."

\*\*\*

Every 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade begins at Gilman Paper Mill.  
But now we call it the Durango-Georgia Company.  
They paid two years' back taxes.  
They say they consider current employees an asset.

\*\*\*

John Stephenson, a 27 year veteran of the paper mill, died on Tuesday, two weeks after he was  
severely burned in a boiler explosion. OSHA investigators have not yet issued a report  
identifying the cause of the blast.

\*\*\*

OSHA receives a complaint after a worker's arm is crushed by the rollers of a paper machine.



Employees had been told to ignore safety procedures which required the machine to be off during maintenance. The machine's safety guards had been removed, and the man's job was to clean the rollers while it ran. OSHA called this and others "willful violations." Penalties ran over \$158,000.

\*\*\*

Executives called it 'unviable.'  
Politicians called us 'the human element.'

\*\*\*

3,000 people had 60 days' notice  
to change their lives.

The new owners had a company man  
tell all the employees on site.  
One said he seemed 'real tore up about it.'  
The closure memo had less than 300 words.

\*\*\*

My mother went alone to the parking lot of the mill,  
where donated food was being distributed to the families of former employees.  
When she got home, the boxes of frozen appetizers were damp with condensation.  
She said the boxes were already crushed when she got them, but that it was all still good.  
I was excited, because she never bought pre-prepared frozen food.  
She carried it all inside in plastic bags.

## 2. Shirtsleeves

## The Regular

He arrived wearing a tweed jacket over a t-shirt,  
a New York Times tucked under one arm  
and a pink elephant prized from the claw  
machine next door in his hand.  
He dispensed himself one house coffee  
and asked me for the ice water.  
He paid in exact change  
and told a tourist sitting in the corner,  
tapping with one finger at his phone,  
“Excuse me, but you’re in my seat.”  
He laid three pills on the table,  
one white tablet halved,  
and crossed one leg over the other,  
one white sneaker set to bobbing,  
to read.  
The café emptied, filled,  
and from his pew he asked the room  
if he could send text messages to Europe,  
if I’d ever crossed the country by train,  
if I knew that he knew David Foster Wallace.  
He dispensed advice for the television pilot season,  
“You gotta put your LA skin on,”  
to a blond actress with a voice that abraded,  
but he didn’t finish his coffee  
or the sales papers,  
before returning his ice water glass  
and his coffee cup  
to the counter  
and asking for luck  
at his doctor’s appointment.  
He took the elephant with him.

## **Business Package**

They abscond together  
three days a week to Tropical Tan,  
and arrive back to the office  
after an hour or less,  
flushed,  
smelling of coconuts and SPF  
in the middle of winter.

She keeps her business cards  
in a holder made of wire flowers,  
and her email templates  
have moving clouds.  
When callers ask  
for the office manager she replies,  
“That would be myself,”  
and leans a little farther  
over in her chair,  
so they can hear her better.

He answers his extension  
with “Hey, big money”  
every time,  
paces around the office  
in pointed driving moccasins  
and thinning gelled hair,  
the back pockets of his designer jeans  
embroidered with eagles,  
their cheeky rhinestone eyes.

He asked me to teach her  
how to create new files  
on her computer,  
and we set to organizing blueprints,  
addenda to demolition plans,  
and a series of photographs that had mixed in,  
documenting her life before pregnancy,  
as a brunette,  
as a blonde,  
in halter tops and out of them.

My mother isn’t surprised.  
She tells me, “He may be your brother,  
but he’s just a man.”

## Invisible Women

The pregnant girl lifted one heavy breast,  
the hem of her pink t-shirt that read  
“That’s MS Bitch to you”  
above a belly swollen with a little girl  
she had already named Lily,  
and told me, “You believe he thinks these are his?”  
We were folding a pair of sheets marked with K’s  
beneath the mattress to fit a queen bed.

Carmen took her top teeth out to eat  
ham and cheese sandwiches in the laundry room,  
said she no longer needs to drink:  
She *arrives* right  
on a turquoise Schwinn.  
she karaokes now  
to bring the house down.  
She talks about love  
in terms of industrial cleansers,  
cleans squares of cheese from the Jacuzzi drain  
wipes handprints from the marbled mirror walls  
collects bobby pins from the soap dish.  
She is saving the world  
one gallon at a time:  
checking the shower curtain for damp,  
saving slivers of soap she mashes  
between her palms,  
crying in the shower a week:  
she calls it emptying her trash can.  
At work, she tells the new girls the ac is busted,  
and watches their put-on faces  
melt in the heat.  
She says, “Cleaning ain’t work for beauty queens.”

I count the beer bottles,  
the number of times I see the businessman  
who won’t let us clean  
and keeps a moving truck full of furniture  
out in the parking lot.  
I watch Carmen use Fabuloso,  
a brand of cleaner she says works better than what they give us,  
fits better in the mouth.  
I count the times they don’t turn down the sheets,  
the honeymoons in the Jacuzzi suites,  
and listen to the pregnant girl

sing to soul music on the room TVs,  
count pocket change left for housekeeping  
in a softer voice than she used to talk to me.  
She has a fiancé who picks her up in his pick-up truck after work.  
She is selecting her fruit tray.  
She's keeping this job to get a discount  
for the room they'll rent  
whenever he sets a date.

I can't count the times she uses the word "love."  
I can only watch her cool her feet  
under the faucet while she cleans the tub.

## **Ars Poetica**

The Clermont Lounge, Atlanta GA

They thanked me darling, thanked me love, thanked me honey,  
when I gave them tips. Blondie licked her top lip  
and danced in a girdle, told me she kept men in line with her tits.  
The woman with the bouncing ass said she wouldn't take anything off  
if no one tipped, told a groping man she hated white people anyway.  
The black woman who danced like she wasn't naked in sensible heels  
held a string of pearls between her cheeks.  
A man threw a balled up fiver at her, so she called him a motherfucker,  
asked him if his mama never taught him any manners, threw it back.  
The brunette who pop and locked and whose boots skid in a moonwalk  
paused when the cd skipped, tied her waist length hair in a knot,  
let it catch on her hips.  
The blonde with the pistol tattooed on one thigh  
said, "Welcome to the gun show,"  
and made her breasts bounce in time to Prince with no hands.  
A man on my right at the bar told me poetry is dead  
while a classy trannie dressed as Marilyn Monroe stooped  
to pluck dollar bills from my hands.  
The landscaper to my left said being here felt like being home  
between all the high kicks and legs lifts,  
and Blondie's cans crushing cans for \$10 a pop.  
She cradles her breasts in her hands after  
and shakes her head at the big bills waving until it doesn't hurt anymore.  
I bought a \$20 lap dance from a 62-year-old blonde named Portia  
who dresses like little red riding hood  
and dances to Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs,  
She smacked her ass and named her grandchildren for me,  
wagged her finger and told me I couldn't touch before I had tried.  
She said her feet hurt in her platforms.  
She asked me if I knew where to find the best peach cobbler in town,  
then pulled aside her nylon panties before I could answer.

My shame later was that I couldn't look her in the pie,  
that I didn't explain to the man that he was looking at poetry,  
it just wasn't as pretty as he'd hoped it would be.  
The landscaper understood that it's the rude kind of truth  
that keeps you coming back, a little beaver with your beer,  
on disco nights at the Clermont Lounge.

## How to Become a Breadman

The college dropout has to take out a personal loan  
to buy territory off a breadman to become a breadman  
and earn the right to deliver pallets of Wonder, Nature's Own  
to convenience stores, mom and pop markets,  
and the Hostess outlet built long before the 24hr fitness center next door.

We're talking more than corners here—  
distribution rights to grocery superstores,  
Love truck stops,  
frantic holiday dinner roll runs.  
When the people need more starch,  
the breadman's cell phone is hip cocked,

he's already backed up to the loading dock.  
When the former breadman passed on  
the keys to the truck, he passed on  
more than a Dodge extended cab caravan—  
he bestowed an investment that is easy on the back.

It's just that the breadman can't party like he used to.  
His starts his route at 3am,  
and he is so independent businessman now  
his friends don't know him anymore.  
This route isn't a job:  
it's an exclusive 3-Noon club.

The milkman brings the Pepperidge Farm rep,  
and they drink to prosperity from tall glasses,  
swim in galvanized tubs of cheddar goldfish,  
and compare notes about the cashiers:  
"Janine? Yeah, she's a butter-face,  
but she likes to go to bed by 7pm."



## **Corresponding with the Department of Human Services**

Rodney came in this morning and said he wasn't Rodney;  
Rodney was his brother.  
Rodney still doesn't have a police record,  
but now he owes child support  
for two children he had with a woman he's on the outs with—  
everything was fine as long as they were sleeping together,  
but now, he said, "She mad,"  
and Rodney doesn't want to be Rodney anymore,  
have his wages garnished  
by some crazy bitch named Sparkle  
who works at the Dollar Store.  
Richard had only wanted to be Rodney  
long enough to evade the warrant  
his mama filed for his arrest,  
but he couldn't come clean about Rodney  
and risk getting fired for being a liar,  
so Richard had been Rodney 7-5  
and occasional weekends  
for the last two years.

His mama would like me to know  
that Richard is a good boy;  
she hadn't needed that flat screen anyway,  
and Rodney's really the one to watch out for.

I fired Rodney,  
hired Richard at Rodney's pay scale,  
but I can't stop calling him Rodney.  
Richard doesn't seem to mind.

**Movie scene wherein protagonist is lent family life dimension:**

He met his wife at a dive bar. She was perched on a stool reading a thin book. He sat next to her, read the title. *Notes from the Underground*, except she didn't look like a beatnik. She wasn't smoking. She was working over an order of nachos. While he was trying to figure it out, work up the nerve to speak, an old guy from the pool tables wandered over with his stick, asked her what she was drinking.

"Merlot."

"What kind of Merlot?"

She said she didn't know, but he persisted, one of those wine class taking men, dating again after a late divorce, moonlighting as an interrogator of class and distinction.

She turned to look him square and said, "Fucking merlot, man."

## Take

After the pizza boy got t-boned,  
he could only deliver from a dun-colored Kia  
by climbing forth from the driver's side window.

I warmed a shot of whiskey in my mouth  
and met him at the door.  
I kissed him like I had been waiting for this.

I took his night,  
his pot habit,  
tobacco warmed from fingertips  
pressed to my neck,  
inhaled printing press ink from his nails,  
a clean blue green.  
Another woman in his beard.

I kissed him and saw her  
grounded on a mattress,  
blue sheets balled in one fist,  
her eyes screwed to a water stain  
creeping on the ceiling.

I kissed him and saw her  
nails scoring her own breasts  
to reach her heart.

I kissed him and saw her  
rise on her elbows to inhale herself.

I kissed him and saw her body bucking  
as if his head between her thighs  
was the only thing holding her to earth.

I kissed him, tongued the taste of her from him,  
and reclaimed a little part of myself for the both of us.

He told his friends  
he could have fucked me,  
should have fucked me,  
as if we have unfinished business,  
as if we both hadn't come to take.

## **Yard Clippings Must Be Kept Separate**

He is the man you call to take away  
your life debris: rebar and busted stoves,  
dead things from your marriage, the highway,  
copper pipe, outgrown bodies and clothes.

Because country people don't have no curbs.  
He takes your beer cans and frayed sofa  
your speakers built without reverbs:  
a yard ornament yield super nova.

Keeping shit all fung shui, your life in zen,  
but the junkman has problems of his own:  
a simple son who raped his girlfriend's  
mother when he saw her in her nightrobe,  
testicular cancer, a hammer toe.

## No Soliciting

Krispy Kremes don't hold up well in plastic garbage bags  
dragged along streets in subdivisions  
named for meadows and streams,  
sold door to door  
for the church of god  
in summer.

Housewives let me wait in foyers  
nicer than my living room,  
with marble tile,  
and fake plants perched on marble columns.

The donuts paid for  
puppet shows on pvc pipe stages  
draped in curtain fabric matching the preacher's wife's dress.

The donuts secured the power team one year,  
who came and tore phone books from a more impressive population  
in two for God.

The preacher's son called his dad diddy.  
He kept his daughters in long hair and gauchos  
and a doublewide trailer next to the swamp.  
We swung from vines like wild things  
until I wasn't allowed over anymore.

But they didn't mind me tagging along to sell donuts.  
They dropped me alone at the mouth of the street.  
An angry man in a silk robe had to teach me  
what 'no soliciting' meant.

## Darrell

He was the youngest,  
a little brother  
peeking through cracks in the door  
his name a battle cry  
gone single syllable  
as we changed for the pool,  
selling our secrets to his parents  
and culling favors from us,  
a character to play in the household we kept  
in a shed fitted with curtains and a plastic stove  
while her parents fought in the living room  
and made up outside in the cab of his father's truck,  
windows streaked with lime  
from the parking lot of the paper mill.

I kept my homemade purse of cartoon fabric and colored buttons  
circus wonder  
on the front seat of my mother's Buick,  
and I left when it was time  
for his sister to make dinner again.  
The pictures from my wallet were squared on the armrest,  
fanned like a good hand of cards,  
the billfold abandoned on the floorboard of the passenger seat,  
ten dollar bill still folded in the money compartment.

I remember he living room smelled like grease,  
pork chops cooking.  
He wore a striped shirt with koolaid  
spaghetti o's stains.  
His sweat turned to mud mustache.  
His arms swinging in furious arcs,  
the dirt boy smell  
and honeysuckle  
coming to me on their wind.

My mother told me later  
he was picked up for breaking into houses  
in our old neighborhood.  
And I thought to myself  
that he had never found, then,  
what he had been looking for.

### 3. Voices from the DMV

## Have a Blessed Day

So I says to Gladys, I says Gladys,  
“Where is that boy of yours with the duckbill haircut?  
Word about town is he’s seeing the Wilcox youngest,  
the one who looks like she can cook,  
and I saw her in the grocery store with her mama on Tuesday  
and a buggy full of bone-in steaks.  
It looked like they had something to celebrate.  
You know her mama’s the one got burned at the nail salon  
--they called her five dollar there—  
but money didn’t stop that little Korean girl with the butter fingers  
from spilling nail polish remover right where they duct taped that old massage chair—  
I’ve been telling them it’s more like riding down a dirt road  
than relaxation—you know she barely made it out alive?  
The chair went up in flames, Korean women tripping outside in platform flip flops...  
Third degree burns.  
The only thing that saved her was the water from the footbath.  
Her hair hasn’t quite grown back in,  
but I told her that Dolly Parton line of wigs really suits her.  
The women in that family are blessed,  
forward and backward.”



## What Big Brothers Are For

His girlfriend got mad I ate her last strawberry pop tart,  
that he had toasted it with American cheese  
before showing me how condoms worked  
with a banana she didn't grudge losing.  
She only fried plantains.  
He told me to always leave a little room at the end,  
while she cooed a Spanish song to their new baby.  
He gave the same attention to explaining the facts of pot  
as my mother had with tampons:  
he gave me a hand mirror,  
a list of euphemisms—  
*rocket, sploof*—  
and said I'm right here for you.  
He waited outside the bathroom door  
while I checked the dilation of my eyes  
said it was good to cough,  
that this is what it's supposed to feel like.

## **The Weather Must Be Nice in Florida**

My brother called and said he was seeing a lot of his dad,  
that he was sitting next to him on the couch right now  
talking about how they both hate my mother,  
but all four of us know he died in a car accident  
when my brother was still a toddler,  
and not sleeping will make you see things sometimes,  
especially when you're taking your girlfriend's diet pills  
to alleviate the pain of unemployment.  
That last big promotion phone call was a lie,  
but the one about my mom telling his girlfriend  
not to bail him out of jail actually happened,  
because in my family,  
you never put up home or vehicle for a man.  
My mother said she talked to her  
like she was her own goddamn daughter,  
but my brother is all up in arms  
he has a mother slinging pearls this color.  
When I asked him if he was getting any exercise,  
he said he walks everywhere  
now that they don't have a car.

## Life in the Undergrowth

It was any action movie with a ropey muscled man in a black shirt climbing from the ocean (shedding a wet suit), parachuting from a plane (in a rhinestone Elvis jumper), tonguing cocktail shrimp from kabobs (breasts bobbing in a cocktail dress). The wiry man dialogues with women in trouble in fur collars, raincoats, nurse uniforms, and serviceable polyester until that moment when they think they're going to die and the tension in the living room is thickest—my father in his dun-colored recliner and me reclining on the sectional. We are lit by the moonlight shining on us through the television, and the attractive couple (currently besieged by communist, baby otter testing environmental wastrels who are making their way up to the mountain cabin where they've taken refuge right this moment on snow skis) starts to kiss—her body moving toward his until their shadows merge and he takes hold of her shoulders and stops her, turns her beautiful face toward the light, her brow delicately furrowed—and kisses her as if he would climb inside her body through her mouth and wear her like a coat and, as they fall backward, the scene changes—their clothes have disappeared, the way they do in my sex dreams, and they are falling now toward a mattress with mussed sheets and—my father *sheeeeeiiiiit* announces a channel change to *Ellen*, a *sheeeeeiiiiit* to *Living Single* and only grunts to punctuate a change to David Attenborough's voice as he describes the hermaphroditic leanings of the leopard slug in a "Life in the Undergrowth" special. We listen now to the jungle birds together in the dark and watch slugs entwine, swinging from a tree branch on a rope of mucous. My father, having calculated the average time of copulation, punches in HBO on the remote and returns us to the action—twisting the sheets about their lower bodies as they roll—and so he recalculates, returning us to the leopard slugs, just as they drop, spent, to the undergrowth floor.

## Drum

This is not meant to be read aloud.

*She orders my life, he said, patting his pit's belly drum.  
Last week I flushed a whole quarter down the toilet.  
Because they give you a stipend for business-wear.*

*When he's done, he ties the condom in a knot.*

*He never did call.*

*You're a tourist here. I'm one of the people who can't wait to get out.  
The corner piece of a brick of pot.  
The back of the flair in her jeans dark.*

*I'm intense, man.*

*They spent years developing coloured bubbles,  
adirondack chairs for the patio,  
chimineas.*

*In my dreams I find my name carved in a tree,  
drive thru a frozen daiquiri dive  
in a hat,  
point at koi fish suspended under a bridge,  
joining the smoking  
and nonsmoking sides of a restaurant.*

*There's a sale.*

*I don't know how to answer that in code.*

*Relate that in square feet.*

*My mother asked me if I was on drugs,  
and she pulled me to her by the hair  
I had braided into tails  
and told me to tell her the truth.*

*She was going to take me to the hospital,  
but she was too drunk to drive.*

*A bicyclist smokes cigarettes  
as the decree in the mail, thin enough to be machineable,  
turns him into an ex-husband.*

*She cracks the window to let the heat escape,  
and he pedals down her street  
and throws a match onto her coat,  
slung in the backseat.*

Foam seating is the most flammable part of a car.

At vacation end, the landlord told her  
*Honey couldn't live*  
to explain that her hen died  
while trying to lay an egg.

*Five white, ten-gallon hats pile out of a pickup truck.*

School mornings I'd close my eyes and imagine getting dressed,  
choosing a matching shirt, brushing my teeth,  
and wake to a glass of ice water in my face  
and my mother telling me it was my own damn fault.  
*If that bus drives by,  
your ass is damn sure going to be on it.*

*Are you the building manager?  
I am your everything.*

*There's something you should know.  
I don't call dudes.*

## Sex Machine

We bought the sex machine  
during Happy Endings' foreclosure sale,  
and it takes up less room than a tanning bed  
but more than an elliptical,  
chockablock with a pressboard computer desk  
and an unplugged fax machine,  
the controls the only surface wiped free of dust  
by fingers like celery sticks  
pushed into the power gloves.

I chestbumped my mother from the doorway,  
she pished and said, "You ain't got none,"  
pointing at my chest,  
so I said, "At least what I got is all mine,"  
and I grabbed both breasts,  
dropping the safety harness.  
I had only managed to get one leg in the body suit.  
We fought to be the first in line,  
but her arms were longer,  
her grip on my forehead solid,  
and my arms hooked  
toward a paunchy middle  
safely concaving away.

The machine blooped,  
its front grill grinning at us,  
the exhaust fans working to flit  
factory installed diaphanous curtains  
around our straining bodies,  
and , somehow, the swanky continental cunt button  
and the extended foreplay button  
were pushed simultaneously,  
and I was squirted by rosewater,  
and suddenly arm wrestling  
a lavender, nonlatex, double-sided dildo  
with special ribbing.  
My mother waved helplessly from the carpet,  
one foot hooked into the pedal,  
the dispensary shoot issuing croissants  
faster than she could eat them,  
and the empty ergonomic seat  
pumping inches from her face.

We tried to ride out the process,

faking moans of ecstasy  
while struggling with the accessories,  
but the sex machine rattled with a loose cog,  
and black smoke mixed with the get from the fog machine.  
Even with one arm free,  
I couldn't reach my pink handled tool kit,  
and fire sprinklers began to discharge  
from the canopy.

Mom corndogged it for the door,  
but turned back just once  
to watch the machine drag peacock feathers  
along my trapped body in the rain.

## Insurance Won't Cover This

Every year I ring in my birthday the same way: I call up my gynecologist and tell him to save me a slot. My birth control has expired, and it won't be renewed until he's said *hello* in his own special way.

The woman on the phone asks how old I am and if I've ever had a pap before, and I tell her I had so much fun last year I'm back again. I wait on an examining table draped in a strip of butcher paper, and I get a paper bolero to wear, opened to the front, and a paper blanket to tent over my lap and make a vagina fort.

A nurse asks if I'm married, if I've had multiple partners, if I've used a condom every time. Every time?

Because single sex is dirty and married sex is clean. I wait for the doctor in my socks and paper couture. I read copies of Good Housekeeping and Self Magazine. I learn how to make a wreath from topiary cuttings before a nurse comes in to ask if I'll see another doctor. I tell her I try not to meet new people over my vagina, that it's a thing I've been working on. I never see that nurse again.

The doctor knocks and opens the door before I have a chance to answer. He asks how I'm doing, but I've been sitting on a paper runway for an hour, so I tell him I had a doctor once who gave me a white cotton robe to wear, and that a pap smear had felt like a pilgrimage to mecca. He doesn't say anything because he's already cranking his cold metal duckbills open, one notch at a time, inside me.

I squeeze my eyes shut because I feel like I'm on that ride at the amusement park that always makes me puke. I'm in the front seat and being winched up the incline for the top. He says from underneath the sheet to relax, that I probably won't even feel it, and I ask him why he needs that butterfly poster on the ceiling then.



## How to Deal with Stress

*after John Berryman*

Brick says only crazy people rock  
when they're not in their cups,  
then she pours me one,  
a cupful in a thimble,  
and I see her point,  
how there might have been a nip slip,

a double bender  
in rhythm, metronome,  
moreover, I drink it down,  
*When in Rome*  
and somehow the tumbler's gone dry  
same as my mouth when she asked

"Where's your people at?"  
Brick only said, "Steady on" and poured another glass  
to steady my hand for the palm reading  
I know won't explain  
my collection of items swallowed  
and then surgically removed.

If I had to do the whole thing over again,  
I wouldn't.

## **Dear Dad: You Look Good in Orange**

I mailed you a postcard that said “Let’s go shoot some guns!”  
unsigned,  
but the front had a photo of an alligator airborne with mouth ajar  
and the caption “Drop in anytime!”

I’ve been doing bicep exercises to counteract the recoil.  
I take my glasses off to fire,  
concentrate on the red dot sight,  
let the target blur.

I recycle spaghetti sauce jars to house spent shells,  
put them in the windowsill to catch the light.  
I have six pairs of scissors in this room alone.

There’s a beauty in who we are.

The neighbor scatters feed corn in the woods  
and hoists a metal seat up to a tree above,  
sits for hours with his scope trained on the bait.  
He eats red and pink Starbursts  
and pisses between the branches.

I’ve been waiting for the right moment.  
I’ve woven his wrappers into a garland.  
I’ve been practicing remaining still.

You’re not going to believe how good I am  
at restoring order.

### **Try Not to Make Eye Contact, If You Can**

The boy with a face only a mother could love  
asked the man clutching a carry-on to his chest,  
where he was headed  
and why he was going  
and how he planned to get there,  
directing his questions  
with a proximity of chin,  
tongue bedded down  
in open space.  
His eyes had skittered  
behind the safety glass of the L train,  
but the man answered  
as if the questions  
were meant to be satisfied,  
and the boy's mother,  
behind her book,  
smiled.

Responsive to the change in air,  
the boy drifted with the opening doors  
toward a man's froth of gray hair,  
the carnival of his USA tote.  
His mother's hand caught his sleeve,  
as he issued the day's low  
into the tin can  
the man used to busk for dollars.

But when the train began to move  
the seat next to her couldn't contain him.  
With his eyes closed,  
he straddled the rails in snow-boots  
reinforced at the ankles,  
hung on with one hand,  
the other lifted,  
warding her protection  
with every finger  
but his middle,  
pressed  
to palm.

## **Closure, or Items Not Retrieved by 5pm will be Burned**

I walk in the door and the dumb twat starts tae-bo-ing me,  
scissoring her legs so fast her nylon shorts start to smoke,  
and I get a little afraid she might take out one of my knees,  
or the glass coffee table I've come to get,  
still set up with the clear resin chess set  
I've always planned on learning to play on,  
so I throw the satellite remote at her  
and the weight from all those menu buttons  
offsets the roundhouse kick  
aimed at the testicles she had grown to love over the years  
with tongue and cupped palm, 100% cotton briefs  
bought not on sale or in the vicinity of bananas and ground beef,  
but from a specialty store in the mall called Slung.  
I make a dive for the Wii  
and she says that was a Christmas present from her mom,  
addressed to us, and, on the "us,"  
a platform flip flop stings my hands from the cords.  
I can't even get up off the carpet before she's mowing me down  
with my own leather computer lounge,  
metal wheels eating in to my driving moccasins;  
I tell her, "Babygirl, please; I just want to make a clean break,"  
and when her face softens  
I punch her right in the tit and get the fuck out of there.

## Peeper

My neighbor asked to borrow our pruning shears, but when I saw him pruning around the antenna on our side of the house I just thought *His reception must be weak*. He seemed to take a lot of walks before primetime began, about the time I took a shower to settle in. My roommate and I shared a jack and jill bathroom with plaster walls, tile that echoed our ladyfarts. The overhead light was bright enough to pluck eyebrows by, and we had a set of red sheers over the blinds that made the sunlight pink. She liked to get high and free animal shapes from the bushes, except I had to tell her the pruning shears had never been returned.

I could see her sculpting with her eyes through the plastic venetians. I waved from my perch on the toilet but I was surprised when she waved back, with some hesitation, and then put her face into her hands.

## The Flood

Yesterday the runoff accumulated over interstates and highways.  
Local schools closed for the day,  
bridges detoured,  
northern neighborhoods evacuated.  
The mobile home park, the one with the in-ground pool,  
advised its tenants to move to high ground.

But the mayor said the water would have had to rise  
another 8 ft before my building would evacuate.  
We talked.

The police directed traffic.  
Street vendors sold corn dogs and whirligigs.  
I documented the creep:  
couples holding hands beneath the spray,  
a flood picnic'er—  
blanket spread next to roiling water the color of red clay,  
beer in hand, hollering, pointing out tree trunks passing by  
thumb hooked in his girl's elastic waistband,  
--advised me to  
*hey, hey, take a picture of that salamander*  
*--you see him?—right there in the water!*

The revelry. The sex of it.  
Business boomed.  
200 homes taken by the flood.

It's not like the coast:  
hurricane alerts,  
oil lamps and gas stove meals,  
the dark wait.

Revelry. to be a part. give in.  
I'm thinking this over:  
what it means to belong,  
my leap into the river,  
my salamander picture.

We topped out at 22 ft. A new record.  
Schools reopened today, but not bridges.  
I'm still taking the long way home.

**Corn Maze**  
Conyers, GA

Colonel Cobb's sign said  
THISAWAY  
and stayed open til ten, so we waited for dark.  
Sister blondes hung from the farm ticket booth,  
all long limbs and scarves,  
cold season duty on a Saturday night.  
They counted bills before asking, "Did you all bring flashlights?"  
*The website didn't mention I should bring a flashlight...*  
A corn cannon arced stalks into the fog.  
She gave us a map, a page of clues we wouldn't be able to read in the dark  
and pointed us to the arrow pointing in.

The woman sitting amid hundreds of pumpkins for sale,  
wooden farmer figures and tractors,  
signs with slogans announcing Fall,  
the shortcomings of men:  
*Give a man an inch, he thinks he's a ruler!*  
offered from her folding chair to get a light from her car.

We listened to the sounds of chickens roosting,  
children still making their way down the corn chute  
in the light from the house,  
until she returned  
fumbling with batteries in paint-stained hands.  
She mentioned it, as we all watched her labor,  
as if the colors were making her fingers heavy,  
her voice slur as she wished us luck.

## **If You and I Met in a Bar**

I'd tell you PBRs make me think of an ex-boyfriend  
who kept sewing his pants together with patches,  
who asked me to help him blow dry his hair into spikes,  
who carried me home on his back one keg of Icehouse night.  
I lost one shoe, and we fell, and then he laughed  
with his whole body.

I'd tell you I have an extra room  
with a double bed,  
it's just that you might wake in the middle of the night  
with my hands over your eyes  
and my voice in your ear—  
and now you'd feel my hands covering your eyes  
and my voice next to your ear saying—  
*ssssssshhhhhh, it'll all be over soon.*

If you need to picture me as a man to enjoy a good rape joke, I'll wait.

I'd tell you about that time  
it was Valentine's day,  
and I had just been dumped,  
and I went to a sweetheart's party  
and drank lemon drops made with kool-aid  
and bad vodka  
and found myself in the back yard  
next to the air conditioning unit  
making out with my back pressed to the brick.

That was the night I broke the dome light in my car.  
For weeks afterward, I would see the same white car  
everywhere I went, and the driver's body  
would hang out of the driver's side window,  
so the woman could scream *You Bitch*.

If you and I met in a bar  
and you were a man,  
I would take it upon me  
to dispel a little mystery  
about the secret lives of women:  
the non-erotic nature of breast exams,  
the actual likelihood of pillow fights,  
and exfoliation gloves.

If you and I met in a bar,



I could buy you a drink maybe,  
and we'd just talk awhile  
about how awkward it is to be human.

VITA  
DOROTHY L. KNIGHT

Education

B.A. English, Valdosta State University, 2006

Teaching

**Instructor**, University of Mississippi, 2011-present  
ENG 101, Introduction to Writing  
ENG 311, Introduction to Creative Writing

**Teaching Assistant**, University of Mississippi, 2010-11  
ENG 211, Survey of World Literature  
ENG 223, Survey of American Literature to the Civil War

Community Arts

**Producer/host** of “VOX Stories,” a true storytelling series sponsored by VOX Press and the Yalnapatawpha Arts Council, 2013

**Coordinator**, Grisham Visiting Writers Reading Series, University of Mississippi, 2011-13

**Asst. Producer** for the Oxford leg of *The Unchained Tour*, an evening of storytelling from the founder of *The Moth*, George Dawes Green, 2013

**Invited Reader**, VOX Press Artist Series, “A Celebration of Female Artists,” 2013

**Volunteer**, Hybrid Performance with Anne Carson and Robert Currie, Gertrude Ford Center for the Arts, University of Mississippi, 2012

**Organizer**, 100,000 Poets for Change event, Oxford MS, 2011-2012

**Producer/host**, “The Basement Stories,” a true storytelling series, Oxford MS, 2012

**Invited Reader**, Southern Writing/Southern Writers Conference, Oxford MS, 2012

**Giver**, World Book Night, *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, Oxford MS, 2012

**Coordinator/host** of “Broken English,” the MFA reading series, 2011-12

**Moderator**, Oxford Conference for the Book, 2011

Editorial

**Contributing Editor**, *Owlcat Review*, Memphis TN, 2012-present

**Assistant Editor**, *Yalobusha Review*, University of Mississippi, 2010-2011

**Editor**, *Malachi Prophecy: Then and Now* by David Parker, published in 2009

**Editor**, *Nspire Magazine*, Valdosta GA, 2005

**Head Writer**, *Metro Magazine*, Valdosta GA, 2004

Nonprofit  
Sector

**Operations Coordinator**, Amelia Island Museum of History, Fernandina Beach  
FL,  
2007-08

Awards

2012-13      Dissertation Fellowship for poetry manuscript “Mouth,” University of Mississippi,

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Member, VOX Press General Board

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